

Remarks Prepared for
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USDA in Iraq: Addressing Structural and Policy Challenges in Iraqi Agriculture

It is an honor for me to be with you today. The Dialogue on Economic Cooperation brings together some of the leading representatives from our two countries to collaborate on Iraq's exciting path forward. Of course, an important part of Iraq's future is agriculture and in this area the U.S. Department of Agriculture is a proud and enthusiastic partner.

I would like to give you a short overview of USDA's objectives and activities in Iraq and then offer three observations for our relationship going forward.

USDA bases its current role in Iraq on the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA). The SFA recognizes the important role of agriculture and the role that USDA plays is clear. USDA's agricultural extension program is mentioned as part of our broader cooperation in education. We are also committed to helping Iraqi farmers 'generate higher incomes' through programs in 'agribusiness, agricultural extension, and policy engagement.'

We in FAS and our colleagues in other USDA mission areas are working hard to carry out the spirit and substance of the SFA's agriculture working group in collaboration with our Iraqi friends. USDA currently has 38 employees assigned throughout Iraq -- 26 with Provisional Reconstruction Teams. PRT Agricultural Advisors focus on strengthening a local province's agricultural infrastructure, both physical and institutional. Projects directly assisting farmers have been developed with local officials in irrigation, animal health, soil and range management, vegetable production, food processing, and in building farmer organizations. At PRTs across Iraq, we have, for example, deployed soil experts from the National Resources Conservation Service, statisticians from the National Agricultural Statistics Service, and animal disease experts from the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. The USDA employees serving on the PRTs are not 'paper pushers' but 'hands-on' partners with our Iraqi friends.

To fulfill the education commitments in the SFA, USDA, working closely with the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture, is providing a range of assistance. For example, in 2008, eight Iraqis participated in USDA's Cochran Fellowship program and received focused training on policy, planning and budgeting. Through USDA's Borlaug Fellows Program, five Iraqis are currently attending U.S. universities studying irrigation management and seed multiplication. USDA is also overseeing a Department of Defense-funded program to make available U.S. Masters' degree programs to 37 Iraqis, the majority of who will begin their US studies in January 2010.

USDA also implements a number of technical assistance activities aimed at supporting the development of Iraq's agricultural sector. A good example is the Iraq Agricultural Extension Revitalization project, a collaborative effort between U.S. land grant universities, Iraqi universities and the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture. The project provides extension training and technical expertise to improve the delivery of agricultural extension services in Iraq.

Before the end of this year, 60 Iraqi government and university officials will have received agriculture extension training at universities throughout the United States. One group is currently at New Mexico State University, looking at extension and water resource management. As these Iraqis return home, they will begin training their colleagues.

USDA also has five agricultural advisors at our office at the embassy in Baghdad implementing projects and advising the ministries of Agriculture, Water Resources, and Higher Education. These advisors have developed effective working relationships through their work on agricultural strategy, animal health, food safety, soil and water conservation, and agricultural extension and education.

So USDA is working hand-in-hand with our Iraqi counterparts. This experience has given us valuable insight on policy issues going forward and I want to share with you three general observations.

First, USDA's efforts to improve sectoral performance in Iraq have been often constrained by legal and regulatory measures. For example, Iraqi farmers have very limited access to modern (imported) plant and animal genetics. Reduced regulation on imports and a greater role for the private sector could bring quick gains to Iraqi farmers.

Second, our experience suggests that Iraq's agriculture will flourish if the role that government plays in agriculture and food policy is better defined. The current Ministry of Agriculture five-year plan says nothing about legislative reforms, although revamping the legal and regulatory system is critical for improving the support framework for agriculture. Reform of current cooperative law, seed law, import and export regulation, animal and plant health systems, water rights and enforcement, irrigation water management and soil fertility management would all benefit from streamlined, modern regulation and enforcement policy. We stand ready to support and assist with a transition to an agricultural economy where government plays an appropriate regulatory and producer-empowering role.

We at USDA strongly believe that Iraq will benefit considerably from the active participation of private sector forces in the agricultural economy. Greater involvement from the private sector will strengthen both farm income and food security. The United States is the world's most reliable food exporter based in large part on our robust private sector. To the extent Iraq needs to import agricultural commodities such as wheat, vegetable oil, poultry and rice, the United States stands ready to supply Iraq with its import needs.

We are confident that a future where private Iraqi companies operate as processors, retailers and traders of agricultural commodities and products, is a future that is productive and bright for the Iraqi people.

Again, thank you for allowing me to be here today. I look forward to a close working relationship with our Iraqi friends and I applaud you for your leadership on agricultural issues in your country.